



Tobacco sales ban for those under 21 would make teen vaping and smoking worse

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At a time when teenage smoking is dropping to unheard-of levels, the federal government this week is likely to raise the legal age to buy tobacco products from 18 to 21. The provision is included in a massive spending package that President Donald Trump is expected to soon sign to pass in the coming days to avert a government shutdown. This move is not only unwarranted and unnervingly paternalistic, but it could also result in more dangerous tobacco use by young adults, as the ban would have the perverse effect of pushing them to consume more traditional combustible tobacco rather than comparatively safer vaping products.

We sometimes forget that those over 18 are legally adults. Being 18 means you can vote, die for your country, get married, have children, get a credit card and buy a rifle. As with drinking, it is dismaying that there are those who would give a gun to an 18-year-old to kill people in foreign countries, yet they would not let them buy tobacco products.

But even if you don't have an ideological objection to restricting the sale of tobacco products to younger adults, there is a very practical reason to oppose the pending tobacco ban if you care about public health: Raising the legal purchase age for tobacco and vaping products would encourage young adults to consume more cigarettes, because they are more common and therefore would be more accessible under a ban than the relatively new, smaller supply of vaping materials on the market would be. Similarly, use of combustible tobacco that is more cost-effective (such as rolling tobacco) would also likely increase, as it always becomes more popular when cigarettes become more expensive, a common result of scarcity.

A prohibitionist ban would additionally probably result in more teenage vapers using illicit counterfeit vaping products, because that's what people turn to when legal channels are shut off. But these products are much more dangerous than regulated products from reputable companies, as demonstrated by the recent wave of vaping-related illnesses and deaths — most of which (though not all) were linked to illegal and off-brand vapes.

Moreover, the unprecedented decline in youth cigarette smoking should be seen as a great public health victory, and vaping should be celebrated as a significant cause of the reduction. Rates of youth smoking have fallen drastically in recent decades. According to the New York Times, in

1997 24.6 percent of 12th-graders reported daily cigarette smoking, but by 2017 that number had dropped to 4.2 percent.

That cigarette smoking has declined is a good thing, and the precipitous decrease in youth cigarette smoking is likely in large part due to the prevalence and availability of vaping. In 2017, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that youth cigarette smoking was cut in half in just five years, an astonishing public health victory. At the same time, e-cigarette use increased dramatically.

Despite recent scares, vaping is almost unquestionably safer than using combustible tobacco. Even former FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb acknowledges that e-cigarettes “are not nearly as harmful as lighting tobacco on fire and smoking it.” While there’s still much to learn about the effects of vaping, long-term and otherwise, the CDC acknowledges that “E-cigarettes have the potential to benefit adult smokers who are not pregnant if used as a complete substitute for regular cigarettes and other smoked tobacco products.”

And that’s a good thing, since, according to the National Youth Tobacco Survey, 87.9 percent of regular high school vapers (vaping 20 to 30 days a month) had previously been smokers, compared to only 12.1 percent of regular vapers who never smoked. Officials in the U.K. have highlighted that 1.2 million Brits have quit smoking by using e-cigarettes.

But that doesn’t mean that there’s an “epidemic” of vaping. In fact, only 5.7 percent of high schoolers are regular vapers. That means almost all of the teens who are vaping are doing so sporadically. Yet, rather than treat this as a victory, American public health officials have turned their sights on vaping. They vilify vaping as a gateway to smoking (that’s not been established), while the health risks are exaggerated.

A zero-tolerance mindset has led many public health officials to declare that “youth use of tobacco products in any form is unsafe,” without trying to weigh comparative harms.

Bicycle riding can also be quite dangerous, but rather than ban bicycle riding, we encourage using a helmet. It’s certainly safer to never ride a bike than to ride one with a helmet, but we appreciate that the best course is to minimize the risk without outlawing a behavior many enjoy. Yet anti-vapers would adopt the tactic of trying to ban bicycle helmets on the theory that they cause more people to ride bikes. Like riding a bike with a helmet, vaping is a relatively safer way to consume nicotine.

The zero-tolerance mindset and the scare tactics employed by vaping opponents have caused an increasing number of people to believe that vaping is as dangerous as smoking. A Reuters poll in September found that 63 percent of Americans disagreed with the statement that “vaping is healthier than traditional cigarettes.” That’s up by 16 percent since 2016.

Youthful smoking has long held attractions, and billions of people around the world clearly enjoy using nicotine. While many public health advocates would rather that no one use nicotine — as well as that no one eat fast food, drink soda or do any number of pleasurable, yet risky,

activities — that isn't a realistic goal. Instead, over-18 adults should be given the opportunity to make relatively healthier decisions.

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